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21st Century Threats to Press Freedom
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As Delivered

Thank you, Congresswoman Ros- Lehtinen -- I'm honored to be here today with Freedom House and the Broadcasting Board of Governors to speak on the important issue of press freedom. Some of you may know I started my career as a journalist. I worked for seven years as a reporter for a television station in Dallas-Fort Worth.

As a reporter, I covered everything from tornadoes to the Texas Legislature -- and it was sometimes hard to tell the difference between them. As I covered political process, I found myself drawn, because I saw the impact that it had on people's lives -- from the taxes paid to hours the parks were open. I covered political campaigns and the 1980 presidential race -- and while some journalists become cynical about politics, I had the opposite experience -- I found myself inspired by the good people I met from both political parties who were willing to put their names on the line, endure the criticism and bad headlines that inevitably come and get involved to try to make their communities and their country a better place. I decided I wanted to be part of that, so in 1984, I left reporting to become the Texas press coordinator for the Reagan-Bush campaign -- since then I've worked for local, state and national campaigns and in the Texas Governor's office, at the White House and now at the State Department -- So over the course of the 30 years of my career, I've had the opportunity to view the press and the government from, as the song says, both sides now.

And while those of us in government sometimes love to grumble about the latest headline or the way a story is written, we also recognize the vital importance of a free press to a free society. As Secretary Rice said recently, quote: "There is no more important pillar of democracy than a free and active press."

Freedom of the press is often called the First Freedom, and for good reason. -- in effect, it protects freedom of thought and expression. A free press is indispensable to a vigorous debate and an informed electorate. Journalists hold government officials to account -- I think one of the best ethics tests ever devised is: would you be comfortable reading about this decision or action on the front page of tomorrow's newspaper -- above the fold. Journalists expose corruption and crime, and shine a spotlight on human rights abuses. Perhaps for those very reasons, we are living in a time of great danger for journalists around the world -- they are at greater risk than ever of being threatened, jailed or killed-- the threats come from a variety of places -- organized crime, by terrorists, narco-traffickers, even sometimes by governments themselves.

This disturbing trend should set off alarm bells --- and a much louder international outcry. According to Reporters without Borders and the World Association of Newspapers, a record number -- more than 110 -- journalists and media workers were

killed last year, marking 2006 as "the bloodiest year on record for journalism worldwide." In the last decade, more than **500** journalists have been killed.

One of the most prominently reported cases last year was the murder of Anna Politkovskaya the courageous Russian journalist who was shot execution-style last October. She was found dead in the elevator of her Moscow apartment building, shot four times. According to news reports, a pistol was left at her feet, the calling card of a contract killing.

Politkovskaya had been a fierce critic of the war in Chechnya and of the Russian Government. Her life had been threatened many times, yet she pressed on – slogging through snow and frozen creeks to get around border guards and slipping into one area by riding on a hay wagon with farm laborers. On the day of her murder, she had planned to file a lengthy story on torture practices believed to be being used by Chechen authorities. Her final media interview before her death was with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, which has special poignancy for me. As part of my job, I represent Secretary Rice on the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees those radios. Politkovskaya was a regular participant on the Russian service broadcasts of RFE/RL – one of the few electronic media outlets in Russia that would put her daring reports on the air. On the morning of her death, she told a friend she had awakened with the feeling that it would be the day she would die. Unfortunately, her reporter's instincts were right.

I mention her story first because it has become symbolic of the new brutality against journalists. Anna was recently selected by UNESCO as this year's recipient of the Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize. We at the Department of State have renewed our call to the Russian government to conduct an immediate and thorough investigation of her murder. Those responsible must be identified and brought to justice.

Journalists like Anna Politkovskaya are on the front lines of human freedom. Yet while her story is perhaps the best known, she is unfortunately not alone. In every region of the world, journalists are under siege. In Latin America -- five journalists in Venezuela have been killed in five years as the press has been restricted ... others have been killed in Colombia, Guatemala, and Guyana. In Mexico, a half-dozen journalists have been killed in direct reprisal for their reporting. Last November, the editor of a newspaper there was found dead in a hotel room, with his hands tied behind his back, a day after his paper ran articles about organized crime and corruption in city government.

In Southeast Asia -- nine journalists have been killed in Pakistan alone since 2002, including Daniel Pearl, and more recently Mohammad Ismail, the bureau chief for Pakistan Press International in Islamabad. He was found with his head bashed in by an iron bar.

In the Middle East -- two leading journalists in Lebanon-- Samir Kassir and Gebran Tuani - were murdered in 2005. Both were strong critics of Syrian interference in Lebanese affairs and champions of Lebanon's sovereignty and freedom. May Chidiac, a

Lebanese television reporter who had criticized Syria's involvement in Lebanon, was wounded by a bomb planted under the driver's seat of her car. She lost her left hand and her left leg. Chidiac was in the hospital nine months and endured 26 surgeries -- but with typical spirit, she said, "I gave my country a hand to fight with and a leg to kick all the enemies with, and they are not few." She went back on the air last summer, even though she was still receiving threats.

We are gravely concerned about the threats against journalists who work for information services like RFE/RL and the Voice of America -- the lone source of credible news and information for people in some parts of the world. VOA correspondents have been killed in Iraq, targeted in Zimbabwe, assaulted in Serbia, arrested in Angola, forced into hiding in Rwanda, forced out of Burundi, detained in Nigeria.

Just a few weeks ago, Khamail Muhsin, a talented broadcaster with Radio Free Iraq, was kidnapped and shot in Baghdad. She was a mother of three children and a brave voice for freedom of speech.

An RFE/RL Turkmen Service stringer was jailed by the government last year and died under suspicious circumstances. An RFE/RL Uzbek service correspondent was sentenced to six months in jail for allegedly insulting a security service employee while covering the 2005 violence against civilians in Andijon. News bureaus were shut down in Tashkent and Russian service correspondents have been detained.

As we meet here today, the Iranian government is refusing to allow RFE/RL journalist Parnaz Azima to leave Iran, where she went to visit her ailing and hospitalized mother. Iranian officials seized her passport when she arrived and have thus far refused to return it, telling her lawyer it would not be returned for "two or three years." We strongly object to Iranian officials keeping Parnaz Azima in Iran against her will and call on the government to allow her to leave the country so she can return to her work and most importantly, to her children and grandchildren.

A worldwide census last year showed that 134 journalists were imprisoned, a record high. In Burma, two men were sentenced to 19 years in prison simply for publishing a collection of pro-democracy poems. On March 12, Burmese journalist U Win Tin, imprisoned for almost 18 years by the military junta and in frail health, marked his 77th birthday behind bars.

The largest number of journalists -- more than 30 -- imprisoned anywhere in the world are in China. Some 50 internet writers are also behind bars there. Despite progress on some fronts, China cannot yet be proud of its record on press freedom. It has taken a welcome step by announcing a temporary relaxation of regulations on foreign journalists to allow them to work more freely in advance of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and when I visited China I spoke with government officials about our hope that this will become permanent to bring China closer to international standards.

The steady stream of reports that cross my desk confirm that journalists today face greater danger than ever before -- just last week, a dissident Cuban journalist was sentenced to four years in prison. In Turkmenistan, at least seven RFE/RL correspondents have had their land-line and mobile telephones blocked in recent weeks. Reporters say security officials are following them daily. And last week, an RFE/RL Belarus Service listener was arrested by the KGB for distributing materials promoting the radio programs. Belarus has become one of the world's most censored countries.

The United States is concerned that many governments are not only moving to silence individual voices, but also are suppressing independent media altogether -- in Burma and North Korea, where there are no independent journalists; Syria allows almost no freedom for local press; and government severely restricts or controls the press in Tunisia, Eritrea, Zimbabwe, Uzbekistan, Cuba, and Equatorial Guinea. Controversial amendments to the media law in Kazakhstan tightened government control over the media, and the Emergency Law has partially restricted freedom of speech and press in Egypt

These worldwide threats to free press should be of great concern to the family of nations. They threaten, not just individual journalists, but civil society itself. Silencing journalists -- whether they write from Internet cafés, in literary journals, or newspapers -- has a chilling effect. Information is suppressed and in this global world, information is vital. Stifling reports about cases of bird flu increases the risk for not only people in one country, but also people in every country. Killing reporters who investigate the drug trade has consequences beyond borders, encouraging the spread of organized crime. Assassinating reporters who unmask government misdeeds allows corruption to grow and impact an expanding circle of businesses and individuals.

What should we all do? One of the most important things we can do is to shine a spotlight on the problem -- build awareness of the threats to journalists and the critical need for a free and vibrant press.

Media groups including the World Association of Newspapers, the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters without Borders have been speaking out and protesting to governments with admirable resolve.

The linkage between a free press and democracy and development has been gaining more attention in international bodies such as UNESCO, the WTO, and the World Bank. An even stronger focus is warranted.

The United States government is fully committed to strengthening the important role of free media. Access to information and transparency are so important to developing countries that we track media freedom as a key part of our annual Human Rights Report -- reporting and denouncing violations. We are working to build a stronger foundation for international press freedom by providing assistance for production of radio and television programs that are independent of state-controlled media, and funding programs for Internet access and training.

With freedom comes responsibility, of course, and journalists have a responsibility to be fair and accurate. The US government supports many non-government organizations that provide training in standards of fairness and objectivity for journalists, editors and media managers from countries worldwide. In partnership with the Aspen Institute and a number of journalism schools, we have launched a new program the Edward R. Murrow Journalism Program, to provide advanced training for foreign journalists –nearly 200 of them just completed a three week visit to America, meeting with policymakers, receiving training in professional standards of objective reporting and learning more about our country.

And I am pleased to report that in the future we will provide spaces in our Edward R. Murrow journalism program for the survivors of slain journalists who choose to study journalism or become journalists themselves. Their work will keep the spirit of freedom of expression alive.

I'm glad that Under Secretary Paula Dobriansky could be here earlier today to talk about threats to internet freedom. Last February, Secretary Rice launched the Global Internet Freedom Task Force (GIFT), recognizing that internet freedom is a key component of press freedom. The U.S. is overall committed to supporting innovative approaches to combating internet censorship, such as developing a secure website for journalists and human rights defenders in closed countries.

One of our most important roles at the State Department is to defend the defenders of freedom. When governments move to limit press freedoms, we are speaking out forcefully. President Bush has personally asked the Chinese government to release New York Times researcher Zhao Yan. Secretary Rice met with the colleagues and son of Anna Politkovskaya to express her condolences during her visit to Moscow and did the first interview with Lebanese journalist May Chidiac when she came back to work. When the Government of Azerbaijan closed that country's leading TV and radio station, ANS, last fall, our government officials including me protested at many levels. Today, ANS is back on the air

This week, on May 3, the world will observe World Press Freedom Day, to honor the brave journalists from Belarus to Cuba to Iran who are struggling valiantly for the right to express themselves and to inform the citizens of their nations. The message must go out that the world cares about press freedom, not just on Press Freedom Day, but every day, to signal that people are watching and pressing governments for full accountability for attacks against journalists and against a free press.

Just before he was murdered in January, Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink apparently sensed he was in danger and wrote his last column about the death threats he was receiving. When he was shot dead the next week outside his newspaper office, thousands of people poured into the streets and the Turkish Prime Minister condemned the shooting as an attack on peace and the stability of the country. As he put it, "A bullet was fired at freedom of thought and democratic life."

So to all the courageous journalists -- writers, editors, producers, cameramen, - who are daily risking their lives in many countries, we want you to know that America stands with you in supporting free of thought and democratic life. We want to be your partners and supporters in keeping freedom of the press and thus freedom of thought and expression flourishing.

Thank you.